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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**THE SINGAPORE ARMED FORCES:
ARE CITIZEN-SOLDIERS STILL RELEVANT TODAY?**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

**MAJOR IAIN HOO
SINGAPORE ARMY**

AY 2010-11

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Executive Summary

Title: The Singapore Armed Forces: Are Citizen-Soldiers still relevant today?

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Thesis: Conscription will remain relevant for Singapore even as global trends indicate more countries are gravitating towards an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in the new security paradigm. It is Singapore's unique demographics, economics, geography, and historical background that define the relationship between the Soldier and Citizen, leading to the latter partaking in the responsibility of defense. Notwithstanding the continued use of conscription to fill its ranks, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) can still fulfill the desired roles of modern armed forces in combating the prevailing security threats, while serving as the national institution of Singapore.

Discussion: As globalization alters the international situation and threats evolve from traditional to unconventional ones, global Armed Forces are pervasively transiting to an AVF setup in order to stay economically relevant and better meet the exigencies of the current security situation. Conscription therefore starts to lose its luster and appeal to modern Armed Forces, despite its traditional linkages to uniting citizens-in-arms for the defense of their country. Situated in a region of uncertainty, without natural resources and vastly dependent on world trade, a small nation like Singapore is susceptible to the dynamics of the world affairs and its immediate neighbors. It is against this backdrop that the SAF remains as the ultimate guarantor of Singapore's peace. Given the changing strategic context and threats perception, the SAF must also continue to evolve. What remains consistent since its inception in 1965 is that conscription will continue to be relevant for the context of Singapore. For a small nation, it is ultimately the collective will of its citizens to bear arms and defend Singapore that proves to be the epitome of deterrence. Conscription is also a sound employment of Singapore's scarce manpower resources *vis-à-vis* its economic emphasis. Ultimately, it galvanizes the citizen-state relationship, while providing the maturing process for boys into men.

Conclusion: Even as conscripts undertake a variety of roles in defense of Singapore, the missions of promoting peace and humanitarianism abroad in support of international peace are still largely executed by regulars and selected reserves. This is a consequence of the perspectives of a maturing society and has no bearing on the effectiveness of the SAF in safeguarding Singapore's survival. In adhering to the changing global trends and renewed roles of the Armed Forces, it is Singapore's unique geography, demographics, and economics that eventually preside over the continuing relevance of its Citizen-Soldiers.

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Preface

Having served as a Recruitment Officer in my last assignment, I was at times deeply bewildered, to the extent of being indignant with the replies from the conscripts when I asked them if they would consider “signing on” as professional soldiers in the Singapore Armed Forces. These conscripts, slightly a decade younger than me, not only were not inspired to serve in the military, but a handful of them even detested being conscripted for National Service. To me, while serving in the Armed Forces requires men of selected personalities, the most important attribute is a person’s gumption to serve and create positive changes to the lives of people around. However, the mentality of conscripts is profoundly disparate, not to even mention their motivation to serve. Their thinking may not be easily comprehended by those whose lives in the Singapore Armed Force began as professionals in the coveted Officer Cadet School. I am an example of one such person.

With this as the backdrop, I am intrigued by the common reverberations made by the conscripts about the irrelevance of conscription for Singapore. This set my motivation to explore and research deeper into the subject on conscription and at the same time, in the hope that I can use my research output as a source of motivation for the conscripts who are misinformed about conscription in the Singapore Armed Forces.

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the global situation and trends that influence Armed Forces worldwide to renew their roles in order to stay relevant. In doing so, I have presented the challenges of conscription. Subsequently, I advanced the unique challenges confronting Singapore and stepwise built the case that while conscription is losing luster for many of the European countries, it still remains as an important mechanism to sustain both Singapore and its the Armed Forces given the country’s intrinsic vulnerabilities and dependencies.

I hereby thank the folks in the Gray Research Centre who have helped me to gather important reference materials for this project and proofread my paper. To my lovely wife who is busy carrying our baby and assiduously preparing for his arrival while I worked on this MMS, I apologize for my absence at times. Finally, I sincerely thank my MMS Mentor and CIAO Professor, Dr Otis for her patience and mentorship towards this project. Her thought-provoking advice has enabled me to delve deeper into my research, and hopefully I have an output that both of us are proud of.

When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen.

*General George Washington
First President of the United States of America
Letter to Provincial Congress on June 26, 1775*

To all of you called up for National Service, let me remind you: You are citizens first and last. . . . However hard, however rigorous, however trying the tasks that you will be asked to undertake, you must never give up. When we welcome you back as a fully trained warrior, you will be a better and stronger citizen.

*Lee Kuan Yew
First Prime Minister of Singapore
At the National Servicemen sending-off
dinner on August 29, 1967*

MMS Main Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

Conscription will remain relevant for Singapore even as global trends indicate more countries are gravitating towards an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in the new security paradigm. It is Singapore's unique demographics, economics, geography, and historical background that define the relationship between the Soldier and Citizen, leading to the latter partaking in the responsibility of defense. Notwithstanding the continued use of conscription to fill its ranks, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) can still fulfill the desired roles of modern armed forces in combating the prevailing security threats, while serving as the national institution of Singapore.

Gone are the days where wars of attrition and annihilation were fought by *levée en masse* to end violence.¹ The current global security environment undoubtedly obliges the modern armed forces to be leaner and more professional in their setup in order to counter the varied and unconventional threats omnipresent in this interconnected world.

As of 2011, out of the 192 countries in the world, more than one hundred countries are operating as full-time AVF, with a substantial twenty percent of them having ceased conscription only within the last ten years. Ten percent of the other countries such as Iceland, Costa Rica, and Micronesia do not even have standing armed forces at all.² (See Appendix A) Countries with a rich tradition of compulsory military service such as Germany and Taiwan have also announced plans to migrate to a professional AVF in the near term. Even Russia has projected a timeline to end conscription in 2030.³ These recent trends outwardly advance the position by governments, military communities, and public sentiments that a more niche, full-time professional AVF seems more suited to the current security and economic environment. Nevertheless, the concept

of conscription has endured more than two millennia to what comes to more than one third of the countries still embracing this approach as of 2011. (See Fig.1)

1.1 Background of Conscription

As early as 500 BC, ancient Greek city states adopted the Civic Republican Approach which stressed that citizenship was a privilege and citizens had the duty to be trained and ready to fight. Likewise, Machiavelli attributed the good order in the Roman Republic in 1500 AD not only to religion which taught men to be good citizens, but also to the significant role of military which created men who were brave, vigorous, and self-disciplined. His republican views on patriotism and internationalism also stressed on the importance of a citizen army as an active defense to deter attacks, and at the same time, achieve national defense and international peace.⁴ Against such a backdrop, the duty of the citizen-soldiers therefore laid the foundation for conscription which progressed into the 18th century before the French Republic implemented it on a grand scale in 1793.

Military service can exist in any of the three models, namely: professional permanent forces which are comprised of purely professional career soldiers; a “citizen army” made up through universal enlistment of citizens who are non-professionals; and a hybrid “cadre-conscript” model comprising professional forces reinforced by peaceful conscription of male citizens to augment the force.⁵ Conscription in modern days represents that of a “cadre-conscript” system, while an AVF is akin to the professional permanent forces setup.

The main surge in conscription arose during World War I which was a war premised on the fighting in mass. Conscription’s *raison d’être* was merely to fill the ranks of military forces to fight war. This perspective was adhered to by the major powers such as the British, Americans, and the Germans.

However, the French idea of conscription diverged much from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. With a defense strategy charted because of its physical geography in Europe, the outlook of France towards defense as a “nation in arms” was a consequence of the numerous incursions which it suffered throughout history.⁶ This concept was also adopted by the rest of the European powers. In contrast, the English Channel offered Britain a good buffer zone and the United States was situated on a separate continent with relatively weak neighbors; the geographical advantages they enjoyed allowed Britain and United States to rely on the use of smaller professional armies.

From World War I to World War II and extending beyond to the limited conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, the rapid mobilization of conscripts to respond to crisis, followed by its immediate post-war demobilization further suggested the short-term role of conscripts in the Anglo-Saxon’s conscription policies. It came as no surprise that Britain and United States eventually abolished conscription in 1960 and 1971 respectively.⁷ Conscription in France survived further until 1997 when it was abolished mainly because of the conscripts’ lackluster performance in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 1991, which bogged the question of its professionalism in the new security environment.⁸

1.2 Armed Forces in a more complex world today

Ever since 1997, more armed forces are transiting to an AVF setup in response to the changing security threats in the 21st century. This stems from the extreme pace of globalization and urbanization which will continue to make the world even more interconnected and interdependent. Advances in sciences, information technology, and network centrality have propelled global trade, communications, and mobility to unprecedented rate and extent. Because of the new interlocking trade and communications networks, future wars are becoming costlier and more devastating in outcomes, which deter any rational leaders from waging them

indiscriminately. The effects of greater mobility also mean that attacks on a nation need not be confined to places within the nation's soil.⁹ Countries' critical assets in various parts of the world become targets for extremists as an avenue of negative expression for that government.

With greater globalization, threats become more transnational in nature. Transnational crimes like drug trafficking and money laundering, attacks on the cyberspace realm to thwart global communication networks, and growing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) will destabilize the fragile peace more readily given the world's better interconnectedness. Over the perceivable spectrum ranging from manipulating religion as an extreme ideology to chemical, biological, nuclear weapons, and cyberspace as mediums to administer asymmetric threats, terrorism will remain as the predominant security concern transcending the world border.¹⁰

In these aspects, Singapore, which thrives on international trade and establishes investments institutions worldwide, is almost inescapable to the changing flux and ramifications in the global sphere.

1.3 The desired roles of the modern Armed Forces

Against the backdrop of the myriad security threats, the military remains as the most appropriate tool mandated to safeguard a country against growing transnational threats. While the character of war evolves according to the global situation, the nature of war remains far more enduring. Armed forces will remain the most resilient military institution as the ultimate guarantor of state security in response to political will.¹¹ Today's emergent security threats have roots in instability and insecurity that originate from other parts of the world. Therefore, apart from defending the state against real or potential threats, armed forces must promote and protect national interests abroad. While the legitimacy of their institutional existence remains undisputed,

armed forces in the 21st century will have to take on renewed missions to justify their legitimacy in the modern societies. In undertaking such missions, it will then provide the necessary justification to acquire new capabilities and hence, for the higher military expenditures incurred.¹² Of pertinence, the renewed roles must provide clarity and distinction to the utility of conscripts and full-time professionals in order to hedge against mounting economic pressure on defense force downsizing. Broadly, the renewed foci for the armed forces are: expeditionary focus on unconventional threats, peacekeeping, internal security, and nation building.¹³

In response to the decline in all-out war as it is perceived in the new global context, the focus of the modern armed forces will have to include an expeditionary war-fighting role on top of its traditional territorial defense function. This includes hedging against threats to the supply of strategic resources and countering drug smuggling, the proliferation of WMD, international terrorism, and insurgency. As these threats transcend borders, armed forces must possess the capability to swiftly deploy to areas of crisis beyond national territory.

Moreover, the defense of the state is also related to the undertaking of peacekeeping responsibilities abroad. This is by equating instability in different regions of the world with the international insecurity more widely. Hence, the eradication of regional instability through peacekeeping eliminates the potentiality of these threats escalating to the home soil and therefore justifies the role of armed forces in self defense.¹⁴ In this instance, Denmark has concluded that it can best defend itself by promoting peace elsewhere, and these efforts entail the contribution of Danish troops to serve under the United Nations auspices.¹⁵

The emergence of non-state-based security threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration mandate the armed forces to assume a more pronounced role in safeguarding internal security. Although the responsibilities may convolve with those of the police and

homeland defense agencies, they nonetheless require a whole-of-government approach to address these new threats through effective interagency coordination. In the United Kingdom, military personnel were deployed for patrolling duties at the airports and maritime counterterrorist activities in the wake of 9/11 terrorists' attacks on the United States.¹⁶

Ultimately, armed forces will have to play the monumental socio-political role towards nation building and reinforce the relationship between citizens and the state. The unprecedented rate of transmigration and people becoming more exposed to diverse cultures, in particular, are impeding nationalism and the forging of a national identity amongst the citizens. Nevertheless, military service can provide an invaluable avenue for national values to be imparted to citizens through common training and experiences. Likewise, uniting the citizens to defend their country is also perceived as a symbolic representation of national sovereignty. In times of natural disasters, mobilization of the armed forces to support the civil infrastructure further provides a ready source of manpower for the government. Such domestic military role reinforces the relationship between the people and the state, thereby leading to more successful nation building efforts.¹⁷

1.4 The Challenges of Conscription

Armed forces, much as to the critical roles they perform, are undoubtedly expensive to maintain.¹⁸ Many governments are turning to downsizing as an effective measure to reduce manpower commitment and military budgets.¹⁹ This will allow them to channel resources towards economic development and improving productivity. With the preemptive logic of market analysis, the straightforward option is therefore the abolition of conscription to support an AVF instead. This is exemplified by New Zealand when it abolished conscription in 1972 in order to provide more support to its population with its national budget.²⁰ In this regard,

cessation of conscription will permit society to allocate its resources in the most efficient manner.²¹ To the armed forces, it can also promote a greater level of professionalism and military efficacy with the elimination of the short-term conscripts.²² Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Sweden are examples of those countries that prefer professionalism at the cost of minor democratic control of the armed forces by the conscripts. Compounded by the sophistication of weaponry and equipment in the technology age, there will be increasing preference for professionals to handle and operate them instead.²³

The expeditionary focus of the armed forces in the new security environment can also hamper the effective use of conscripts. The conscripts who are enlisted to serve for an average of eighteen months may not be competent and proficient in executing contemporary warfare dealing with unconventional threats which require niche skill-sets.²⁴ Conscripts are also very much limited in their utility in the delicate peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, to justify their use in international interventions away from home to the public is always a challenge.²⁵ Likewise, they may also not be as adept as their counterparts in the AVF in handling the modern equipment, which are dependent on experience acquired and deep expertise attained over longer periods of service. Ultimately, conscripts can potentially deter the effective use of the nation's resources which could otherwise be invested in training and equipping the professionals. The professionals who are bound to the armed forces for a longer period of time can better justify the return of investments.²⁶

Socially, the public's attitude is a determinant to the fate of conscription. According to Edward Luttwak, in advance societies where there is a general decline in the birthrate, the resultant of smaller nuclear families makes the loss of children in warfighting much more traumatic than in the era of large families.²⁷ As much as the *raison d'être* for conscription has

roots to nation building and citizens-state galvanization, the safety and well-being of the males serving under conscription are still paramount concerns of their families and for the state as well. Negative public sentiments towards conscription will accumulate when there are losses of conscripts serving in peacetime.

Furthermore, the meaningful employment of resources is another contention against conscription. A large bulk of time, effort, and resources committed on routine training for the conscripts for contingencies, or on maintenance of military infrastructure do not allow the conscripts to derive meaning or purpose to their existence. As a result, the popular misperception is that conscription is a complete waste of time and youths could better contribute to the defense of their country by contributing to its economy rather than the military muscle.²⁸ The question of conscientious objection to bear arms and compulsory military service also hampers the support for conscription in modern democratic societies.²⁹ In the case for those less patriotic towards the national cause, serving in conscription will naturally be the nadir of their lives. The ramifications, as a result of the lack of motivation during service can lead to the overall decrease in professionalism and effectiveness of the armed forces. Alongside, negative reverberations of their dismal attitude towards conscription can affect the public's perception of conscription, thereby straining the citizens-state relationship and impeding nation building efforts as a whole.

2. THE CHALLENGES CONFRONTING SINGAPORE

2.1 History and the imperatives of National Defense

For a small state without natural resources and intimately dependent on external trade to sustain its economy, Singapore's innate lack of strategic depth portends dangers to her eventual survivability in this region of the world. Established as a crown colony of the British Empire for over a century, the perils confronting her national survival were first crystallized during World

War II. Singapore, at the discretion of its British colonial masters, eventually capitulated to the Japanese Imperial Army after a decisive battle lasting merely seven days in spite of strong resistance put up. The brutality of the ensued Japanese occupation which lasted for three years and eight months devastated the Singapore people, resources, and infrastructure in entirety. Although the British returned after the war in aim to restore the public's confidence, it had already dawned on Singapore that the survival of the nation could not be left to others.

Further exacerbated by the two tumultuous years under the ambit of the Malayan Federation, Singapore was eventually thrust into independence in 1965.³⁰ Communism and violence from triads were also prevalent and threatened to tear the new sovereign nation apart through civil and social unrest. Compounded by the *Indonesian Konfrontasi*, which instigated violence based on racial and religion grounds, these uncertainties reiterated the idea that a multi-ethnic Singapore with neither natural resources nor hinterland, and composed of a diverse ethnic makeup was extremely susceptible to extinction anytime.³¹

Juxtaposed against such a backdrop of insecurity, the urge for national defense was intensified to provide Singapore with a better chance of survival. Coupled with the unexpected announcement of the British to depart Singapore in 1968, it ascertained that Singapore must have the ability to fend in times of crisis because even the colonial masters could abandon her in her most trying moments to survive.

2.2 Singapore: In a region of uncertainty

Situated in Southeast Asia, which depends on the larger East Asia as her hinterland, Singapore is susceptible to instability and conflict in this region. Asia, which spans a third of the earth's land mass, is believably the new center-stage for world affairs in the 21st century, given

its rising population, vast human capital potential, and emerging economic opportunities.³² It is yet another major hotspot with numerous flash points in the last decade.

Notably for East Asia, the triangular relationship among the United States, China, and Japan will continue to be a key factor in determining the regional security climate. Yet, the leap in China's new naval capabilities and recent unveiling of her stealth jetfighters, coupled with changes in Japan's military posture from a self-defense role after World War II to an active role in the new century will signify new defense dynamics in North Asia.³³ This could potentially spark a new wave of arms race that threatens regional security. Coupled with the longstanding China-Taiwan cross-straits tension and the recent escalation of violence between North and South Korea, North Asia portends as many uncertainties as opportunities that directly impact Singapore's foreign and defense policies.

Singapore's economy and stability are intrinsically hinged to the delicate regional situation and dynamics amongst its neighbours. The noticeable quicker political transitions in key ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines in the last half a decade created uncertainties in the regional political climate. Situated beside the world's more important gateway, Singapore's economic lifeline depending on *entrepôt* and shipping trade is profoundly linked to the security of the Straits of Malacca. Likewise, the dependency on immediate neighbors for a supply of fresh food, clean water, fuel, and construction materials continues to bind Singapore to the political and economical dynamics of the region.

In a region particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and effects of climate change, the Asia-Pacific region accounts for more than 90 percent of the people negatively affected in the world since 2000.³⁴ These disasters range from earthquakes, tsunamis, excessive flooding, and cyclones that plague low-lying littorals and regions in the earthquake zones leading to the loss of

lives and trade, and making the poor even more impoverished.³⁵ Just as the tsunamis inundated the coasts of Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka in 2004, Singapore needs to consider disasters of such nature and their ramifications on the region as part of its national security strategy.

2.3 Growing implications and emerging threats

While globalization and information technology have helped to transcend the limits of Singapore's size and space, they bring about other side effects. Being plugged into the world will also mean that events elsewhere can have huge and immediate impact on Singapore's economic interests and national security. Just like the U.S. Subprime Mortgage Crisis that resulted in the global financial meltdown in 2007, it illustrated that Singapore cannot be insulated from the effects of events elsewhere. Singapore's new position as an international hub also brings with it numerous economic benefits, as well as resulting in it becoming more porous and vulnerable to a diverse range of security threats. Despite thriving as an economic and financial hub both regionally and globally, the lack of strategic depth makes the defense of the island inherently challenging.

Demographically, the declining birth rate further aggravates the woes of the current inbound immigrant policy and leads to greater social divide between the citizens and non-citizens. While more foreign talents can spur and sustain the competitiveness of the Singapore economy, they also compete with the locals for jobs and the use of social amenities. Given a threshold to the extent of land reclamation works plausible to hedge against limited space in the face of a net rising population, a dwindling citizens pool and concerns of social cohesion are key national issues that Singapore has to contend with.

In the age of asymmetric threats, terrorism will remain among the "tier one" concerns confronting Singapore in the near to middle term. Interestingly, Singapore is viewed as

“America’s aircraft carrier” which is a high value target eyed by the violent Islamic extremists who operate in a region largely surrounded by Islamic states.³⁶ The large ethnic Chinese makeup in its inherently ethnically diverse population also portends a weakness to be exploited by Islamic extremists in creating strife and tension within Singapore.

In a similar vein, terrorism can also manifest in two other forms which are detrimental to Singapore. Firstly, advancement in information technology can be exploited for cyberspace terrorism directed at Singapore’s economic, social, and defense infrastructure. Secondly, the use of bioterrorism and chemical warfare on a small country like Singapore with high population density can prove to be lethal in inflicting physical damage and psychological consequences on its people. Ultimately, terrorists aim to destroy Singapore, not physically, but economically and socially.

3. CONSCRIPTION AND THE SINGAPORE ARMED FORCES

3.1 The unflinching responsibilities of the SAF

Situated in a turbulent part of the world, Singapore’s defense policy is premised on the concept of the “twin pillars of deterrence and diplomacy.”³⁷ Fundamentally geared towards the protection of national soil from incursion or contention in a regional of historical instability, the defense strategy also serves to maintain a favourable sub-regional balance of power in maritime Southeast Asia and protect the sea lines of communications serving Singapore in the interests of global trade.³⁸ The corresponding national security strategy therefore focuses on the conceptual framework of “prevent-protect-respond”, in concert with the ability to defend forward by striking potential threats at their source.³⁹ With this in mind, the existence of the SAF is primarily predicated on her mission to deter two key threats confronting the nation – ensuring Singapore’s sovereignty through territorial defense against external aggression and deterring any forms of

asymmetric threats that aim to thwart her economic prosperity. In safeguarding Singapore's sovereignty, it also means defending against potential territorial disputes in a region historically part of a larger archipelago.

In order to prosecute its assigned tasks, the establishment of a strong and credible SAF is necessary. Not only does the size of the defense force lend clout to a state constrained by its physical geography, but also the quality and effectiveness of the technologically-driven SAF are even more paramount to maintain its credence in achieving the deterrence effect. Therefore, only a properly tasked organized SAF with appropriate manpower resources, drawing on talents from the entire country can maintain its competitive edge and manifest its full-force potential. This is the premise of conscription to create a broad-based, young, fighting fit, and capable SAF in defense of Singapore.

3.2 The inception of National Service

Singapore's defense is inextricably linked to the concept of conscription inaugurated in 1967. A small island state with a population just under two million in 1965⁴⁰, conscription was the most viable option to swiftly establish a sizeable defense force for Singapore in the aftermath of her independence which was confronted with a multitude of security threats. Built from a nation of immigrants, male conscription helped to instill a sense of patriotism and unify the ethnically diverse population, as well as build up a cohesive nation for a new sovereign Singapore without a national identity.⁴¹ Furthermore, conscription aided the control of social violence by siphoning young males into the cause of national defense rather than involvement in triad or communist activities.

The SAF is anchored on a cadre-conscript system which comprises a small corps of professionals, known as regulars with a large pool of conscripts.⁴² Conscription takes the name

of National Service (NS) whereby every able-bodied 18-year old male Singaporean or Permanent Resident serves a period of two years in the SAF. Upon completion of the active period of the NS, the conscripts transition to the reserves corps, known as Operationally-Ready-National-Servicemen (NSmen) to serve a further of ten years for the enlisted. NSmen serving as Non-Commissioned Officers serve until the age of 40, while Officers serve until the age of 50. Of significance is that even when the conscripts transit to the reserve corps after their active service period, they continue to rise in seniority and be promoted in ranks to undertake key positions and responsibilities which are equivalent to those in the regular corps. Concomitantly, the smaller pool of regulars provides the cadre, partnership, and management for the 420,000-strong SAF.⁴³ Ultimately, this overarching NS concept is for an intertwined leadership comprising active and reserve leaders to command and manage the SAF so as to instill the confidence that the SAF's potential is true to the size of its full-force and not merely a function of its regulars.

3.3 The enduring fate of Conscription

Predicated on conscription to swiftly establish the SAF in 1967, the conscript system continues to exert its pertinence in the new era confronted by asymmetric threats. Numerous armed forces have downsized or opted to do so in order to effectively reduce the military overheads and expenditures by diverting them into economic development. On the contrary, a small nation like Singapore, which thrives on a relatively smaller Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to more developed countries, continues to invest steadily up to six percent of GDP on defense every year, even during periods of economic recession. Anchoring on the belief that national stability is the cornerstone for economic prosperity and social stability, the prudent use of its national budget and deliberate investment of scarce manpower and talent pool are deemed worthwhile for Singapore.⁴⁴

3.3.1 Deterrence through the Will of a Small Nation

The defense of Singapore must never be left to a selected few. In order to achieve that, defending Singapore requires not only the professionals, but all able-bodied males to bear arms and fight. Professionals may be considered mercenary, but definitely not citizens who represent the will of the nation. The expression of the will of its people will provide the necessary deterrence and in the last resort, the physical defense against the aggressors of Singapore. This is precisely the providence that history has left for Singapore having fallen prey to the Japanese during World War II. The defenders were composed of largely non-indigenous such as the 8th Australian Division and the 3rd Indian Corps who were assigned to protect Singapore purely because of its strategic importance in the British Empire.⁴⁵ For the British who had governed Singapore for more than 120 years, the surrender of Singapore to the Japanese was merely regarded as a transfer of ownership albeit with embarrassment for not being able to defend it; to the people of Singapore, it was the dawn of brutality and bloodshed inflicted upon them and persisted throughout the war.

For Singapore, the demonstration of the citizens' will to bear arms to defend against external threats in an era where the possibility of an all-out territorial conflict has receded tremendously, but not necessary absent, will serve as the linchpin of deterrence. Given the fundamental lack of strategic depth, Singapore was demonstrated to be defensible for seven days at most, as illustrated by the duration that the British had managed to defend Singapore before capitulation to the Japanese. Given the vast improvement in technology today, the time required by credible modern adversaries to defeat Singapore could be even less. Regardless of the responsiveness of her numerous allies or the rapid intervention by the United Nations, Singapore cannot afford for these efforts to be relegated to counterattack actions. It is with such a grim

hypothesis that Singapore's defense for the past 45 years has sought to neutralize potential threats at their source.⁴⁶ To further advance the collective will of the nation, the concept of Total Defense was inaugurated in 1984 in aim to rally the entire nation into accepting the defense of Singapore as a "responsibility for all."⁴⁷ It advocates an all-round deterrence effort in which all citizens, male and female, share the duty of defense by the unification and commitment of all sectors of society.⁴⁸

3.3.2. Optimization of scarce manpower resources for defense

In order to economize Singapore's scarce human capital, the manpower required in sustaining an armed force of credible size and quality needs to be derived from the entire population. Although the population of Singapore has grown steadily from 1.8 million in 1965 to 5 million in 2010, the size of its citizens and permanent residents merely stands at 3.7 million, with the remaining as foreigners. Of this, only 1.29 million males are eligible for NS. In contrast to the size of SAF which expanded manifolds from 1965 to 2010 in response to the variety of threats confronting Singapore in an increasingly complex world, the new population mark makes sustaining a 420,000-strong SAF through an AVF model highly unrealistic. The idea of committing 32 percent of the eligible 1.29 million males as career soldiers is of total absurdity – neither logical nor economically achievable for a small nation heavily dependent on trade for survival. In comparison, countries with leading AVF armed forces such as the United States, United Kingdom, and France utilize less than five percent of their eligible males.⁴⁹

In Singapore, this situation is further aggravated by the falling birth-rate over the course of the last two decades which resulted in the dwindling national manpower pool available for military service. Furthermore, the same national resource pool must be balanced against spurring economic prosperity and social needs. In consideration of all competing demands, conscription

will remain as the pragmatic solution to the issue of scarce manpower for Singapore. Through universal male conscription for a nominal period of two years, these soldiers can return to contribute to the economy afterwards. Adopting a tiered readiness approach, the conscripts will transition into the reserve corps and continue to serve in the force for a period ranging from 10 to 40 years. Such a system can effectively alleviate the toll on economic progress, while according the emphasis on defense for a small state confronted with immense susceptibilities.⁵⁰

3.3.3 The National Institution of Singapore

Conscription in a democratic society retains the veneer of universality for all male Singaporeans, thereby supporting nation building efforts.⁵¹ Where the SAF has become the “school” for the nation, it is also a common rally point to forge cohesion and impart national values through universal male conscription. National Service is the common defining stage for boys to become men through the rigors of military training. Through the common experiences, conscription enables every cohort of conscripted males to unite-in-arms and develop martial values through the defense of the country.^{52 53}

Universal conscription is crucial to cultivate a national attitude towards risks, self sacrifice, and the level of casualty acceptance, from peace through war for the cause of Singapore defense. Unfortunately, risks and hazards are omnipresent in any profession, more so in the military. No parents would send their children into harm’s way, even under the most compelling circumstances. However, according to Charles Moskos, citizens tend to accept hardships better when the elites and leadership are also viewed as self-sacrificing. This explains why only when the privileged classes perform National Service can the country define the cause as worthy of young people’s blood.⁵⁴ It is in this light that universal, rather than selective conscription will continue to be relevant for Singapore not just because of the manpower

required to sustain the SAF, but for the unbiased treatment of the various social classes. This self-sacrificing belief was clearly demonstrated during the inauguration of NS in 1967 where ministers were the first to volunteer for military service; Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore then also sent both his two sons to serve in the SAF.⁵⁵

Likewise, having defense democratically anchored through conscription also creates social and political value to the nation. Conscription provides the society with men with prior military experience and the virtues of discipline and martial values.⁵⁶ From the individual perspective, it is also a chance for personal growth, character development, and opportunities for interesting experiences while representing Singapore to secure peace abroad.^{57 58} More importantly, politicians can appreciate the military better having undergone active conscription. In turn, such experiences will enable the politicians to better empathize with the SAF, and at the same time, deter them from using the military too lightheartedly.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the SAF being democratically anchored with conscripts can also be the counter-voice for the politicians when faced with situations of injudicious employment. This method of checks and balance ensures proper consideration when faced with the situation of *jus ad bellum*.

3.3.4 A Melting Pot for Singaporeans⁶⁰

Conscription will continue to enable the SAF to be more representative of the general population, especially for an ethnically diverse Singapore.⁶¹ This will eliminate any risks dividing the society and alienation of any social or ethnic groups. Moreover, the unique racial and religious composition of Singapore makes conscription a valuable conduit to cultivate cross-culture experience and facilitate interaction between the different racial groups. Such interactions can nurture cultural tolerance and religious restraint towards diversity and contribute to the overall racial and religious harmony of the nation.

The integration and harmonization of the various social classes is another benefit derived from sustaining conscription. Especially with the unequal distribution of wealth in the modern Singapore society, retaining the universality for its males to serve in the military can better harmonize the community and preclude any form of caste distinction. It was noted when the United States converted to a full AVF in the 1970s, statistics showed that relatively few in the homes of the affluent and academically privileged served in the military.⁶² This aversion to military service risks tearing both the society and military apart. Being socially and ethnically diverse, these inherent risks for Singapore are even more profound.

Especially for a nation faced with an acute manpower and talent shortage, Singapore cannot risk both alienating and sub-optimizing any segment of the society. It cannot be a case where the SAF is solely composed of the less academically privileged and underclass that have a higher propensity to serve in the military, while the intellectually-capable with their pre-conceived notion of the SAF shun from military service. The SAF has to comprise equally of a multitude of talents and be just as representative as Singapore's talent make-up in its economic and education arenas. Only then can the defense force be credible, robust, and premier in confronting the unpredictable complex threats.

Moreover, conscription plays key roles in facilitating the assimilation of new male citizens into the society and further engendering the fealty and collective will of the new citizens towards national defense. With the impetus to sustain economic competitiveness and circumvent the effects of falling fertility rate, the new immigration policy to attract foreign talents into Singapore can potentially manifest a new set of social problems. Accordingly, the notable rate of influx of new citizens will substantially modify the composition of the SAF and its corresponding culture with new additions from China, India, and other countries. Anticipating

this trend to persist, conscription remains important in serving as a social melting pot for the new citizens and their offspring to allow them to assimilate into Singapore's multi-racial culture. In the process of cultural assimilation through military service, it is aimed to imbue fealty in the new citizens that Singapore is their home and espouse the will to defend it in times of crisis.

3.3.5 An effective conduit for recruitment

Conscription will remain a pivotal recruitment tool for SAF to sustain its regular corps. It enables the SAF to induct and select the most suited from every cohort of the 18-year-old males to serve as full-time professionals. In an Asian culture where military service is much disdained, it remains an uphill task for the SAF to impress upon the new generation in serving as professionals in the SAF at the outset of their decision making without having experienced the imperatives of the military in national defense. This is a consequence of the comfort of being brought up in the peaceful post Cold War period. Although not disadvantaged by not having experienced the trauma of the Japanese occupation, or the racial violence which plagued Singapore during the *Indonesian Konfrontasi*, the contemporary Singaporeans may not be able to fully appreciate the perils challenging Singapore's survival as a small nation in a region of uncertainty. Supposedly every generation of Singaporeans has competing priorities unique to its era, it is inevitable that the imperatives of defense may lose its luster over time due to the lack of perceived confrontational threats. Nevertheless, conscription can serve to bridge this psychological divide. A benefit precipitated as a result of NS is therefore to imbue in every generation a firmer understanding of defense, as well as a short stint of military life before committing to a full career in the SAF. In turn, the SAF will have a larger talent pool to select its regulars from. The outcome will be a defense force higher in caliber, which draws upon the best in the society to undertake the cadre role for the entire SAF.

3.4 The SAF as contemporary armed forces

The contemporary foci of the SAF are very much in concert with the desired roles of modern armed forces. Besides the conventional role of territorial defense and renewed expeditionary focus towards the fight against asymmetric threats, the SAF is also the national institution that inducts every cohort of males with national values and further galvanizes the citizens-state relationship towards the cause of defense. Extending into the role of internal security, the SAF is part of the island defense network which actively supports the homeland agencies in internal defense. As evident from the escape of the top Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist from the local detention barracks in 2008, the swift response by the SAF contributed to the overall security of the state, and at the same time underpinned the relevance of a defense force.⁶³ In all three focal points for the SAF, both active and reserve conscripts partake the duties to safeguard Singapore just like their regular counterparts.

In promoting peace and humanitarianism abroad, the SAF recognizes the transnational nature of threats and espouses this concern through the commitment of its regulars and reserves to international peace.⁶⁴ Notwithstanding the Deterrence-Democracy-Deployment (DDD) model by Henning Sorensen, which denies that conscription is an obstacle to increase involvement in peacekeeping missions,⁶⁵ the context of Singapore's active conscripts engaging in international peace missions differs much from that of Denmark's.⁶⁶ Reserve NCOs and Officers, having completed active conscription are considered operationally ready for deployment; selected reserves, together with their regular counterparts have participated in peace support and humanitarian missions under the ambit of the United Nations since 1997.⁶⁷ However, this is not the case for active conscripts who are still regarded as amateurs for international operations. The exception occurred in February 2011 when active conscripts who were on bilateral training in

New Zealand when a 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck were deployed to assist in the local disaster relief mission.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, given the resource constraint for a small state, mandating the employment of conscripts for international peace must be carefully considered in order not to erode the citizens-soldiers' will towards national defense. Conscription draws upon the most talented, competent, and able males to serve in the SAF. Hence, the question of intellect, skills, and professionalism of the conscripts are not the underlying considerations towards the option for their employment overseas. On the contrary, for a citizen-based armed forces, it is ultimately the perception of the public towards potential risks, concept of self-sacrifice, and the level of casualty acceptance which are the decisive factors in influencing the roles of conscripts. However, this does not preclude conscripts, who have understood the implications of their involvement from volunteering for these missions.

4. CONCLUSION

Despite the changing world and evolution of the global armed forces, the unique characteristics of Singapore, coupled by its requirements ultimately preside over the policies governing the force composition of the SAF. It is in this light that citizen-soldiers will continue to form the staple in the SAF, given the constraints of Singapore's physical geography, demographics, economics, and the regional security context. In keeping pace with the ideals of modern armed forces, the SAF has established itself as a credible defense force to confront the prevailing threats through the collective will of its citizen-soldiers. Being a democratic armed forces means that citizens-soldiers and cadres will continue to be pivotal in shaping its defense policies and strategies. Although conscripts may not be employed in all aspects of the renewed roles of the armed forces, the relevance of the SAF as a contemporary fighting force is not

negated in any way. Furthermore, the issue regarding conscription of women, which is beyond the scope of this paper is not a due consideration for supplementing the overall strength of the SAF. There are also no operational needs at this stage. Considering the existing strength of the SAF, the key to women conscription becomes more of an issue of gender equality confronting a maturing democratic society. Ultimately, the economy and defense of Singapore are inextricably linked to the utilization of its shared and scarce manpower resources. While foreigners can supplant the roles of citizens in spurring Singapore's economy; no one will defend Singapore unless the citizens are willing to commit.

Appendix A

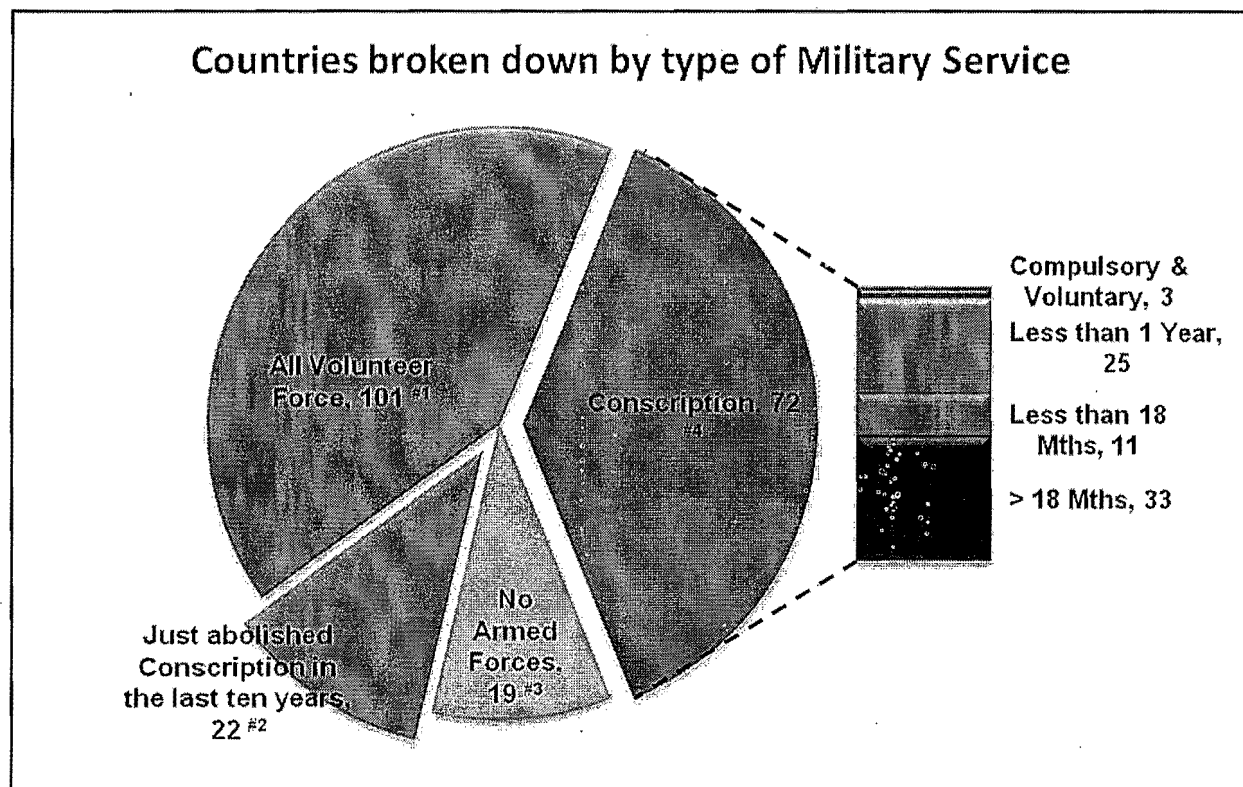


Fig.1 Breakdown of the type of Military Service in the 192 countries in the world.

Source: http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/mil_con-military-conscription

#1. Out of the 192 countries, 52.6% of them have All-Volunteer Armed Forces. This includes 22 countries which have transitioned to the AVF model only in the last ten years.

#2. The 22 countries which have transitioned to the AVF model, arrayed according to the recency in which they abolished conscription: Serbia (2011); Albania, Sweden (2010) Poland (2008); Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Lebanon (2007); Bosnia, Herzegovina, Morocco, Montenegro, Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia (2006); Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Portugal (2004); Slovenia (2003); Spain (2001), Tanzania (2000).

#3. Of the 19 countries which do not have standing Armed Forces, Costa Rica and Panama were the only two countries with previous Armed Forces but abolished them in 1948 and 1992 respectively.

#4. Of the existing 72 countries which continue to practice conscription, three of them will transit to the AVF in due course. They are: Germany (mid 2011), Ukraine (2011-2013), and Taiwan (2014).

Notes

¹ Anna Leander. "Drafting Community: Understanding the Fate of Conscription." *Armed Forces & Society*, no. 30 (Summer 2004): 571.

² Charles Moskos. "Defence Transformation in Europe Today: Implications for the Armed Forces." *Defence Transformation in Europe: Evolving Military Roles*, October 2005: 104.

³ RIA Novosti 2010. "Russia to keep conscription until 2030 - draft military doctrine". August 1, 2008.

⁴ "Citizenship Controversies: Conscription and Conscience."

⁵ "Citizenship Controversies: Conscription and Conscience."

⁶ George Q Flynn. *Conscription and Democracy: The Draft in France, Great Britain, and the United States*. p3-4, 25.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_in_the_United_States#End_of_conscription. It was stated that the decision to end conscription was arrived in the Senate in 1971. However, 1972 saw the last men conscripted before the announcement that no further draft orders would be issued from 1973 onwards.

⁸ George Q Flynn. p256-259.

⁹ Kee Nguan Goh. "The Singapore Army: Moving decisively beyond the conventional." U.S. Army War College, May 2004: 2.

¹⁰ United States Joint Forces Command. p16-24, 34-37.

¹¹ Timothy Edmunds. "What are armed forces for? The changing nature of military roles in Europe." *International Affairs* 82, no. 6 (November 2006): 1066.

¹² Timothy Edmunds. "A New Security Environment? The Evolution of Military Roles in Post-Cold War Europe." *Defence Transformation in Europe: Evolving Military Roles*, October 2005: 10.

¹³ Timothy Edmunds. p1065-1074.

¹⁴ Timothy Edmunds.: p1069.

¹⁵ Henning Sorensen. "Conscription in Scandinavia During the Last Quarter Century: Developments and Arguments." *Armed Forces & Society*, no. 26 (Jan 2000): 330.

¹⁶ Timothy Edmunds, and Marjan Maleic.: p12.

¹⁷ Timothy Edmunds.: p1073-1074.

¹⁸ Charles Moskos.: p103.

¹⁹ Henning Sorensen.: p324.

²⁰ <http://ns-singapore.blogspot.com/>

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- ²¹ Clay Harris. "Masters, Martyrs and Spectators." United States Naval Institute Proceedings 125, no. 4 (April 1999): 34.
- ²² Anna Leander.: p584-588.
- ²³ Henning Sorensen.: p325-326.
- ²⁴ Anna Leander.: p588.
- ²⁵ "Thinking bigger." The Economist [UK], October 16, 1999, 52-53.
- ²⁶ Anna Leander.: p588.
- ²⁷ Anne Aldis. "Military Systems in the 21st Century: Changes and Continuities." Defence Transformation in Europe: Evolving Military Roles, October 2005: 24.
- ²⁸ Charles Moskos.: p107.
- ²⁹ George Q Flynn. p191-206.
- ³⁰ MINDEF. "History – 1965: Independence of Singapore." Volume 1 Issue 8, August 7, 1997.
- ³¹ MINDEF. "History – 1963: Konfrontasi." Volume 1 Issue 9, January 7, 1997.
- ³² Robert S Wang, Jeffrey D. Bean. "Asia's Response to Natural Disasters." Centre for Strategic & International Studies, July, 2010: 1.
- ³³ Ministry of Defence (Singapore). "Defending Singapore in the 21st Century." Singapore: Ministry of Defence, January, 2010.
- ³⁴ Robert S Wang. p1.
- ³⁵ United States Joint Forces Command. p24-34.
- ³⁶ "National Security: Report of a conference organized by Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies."
- ³⁷ Tim Huxley. *Defending the Lion City*. Australia, Allen & Unwin, 2000. p24.
- ³⁸ Tim Huxley. p70-71.
- ³⁹ "National Security: Report of a conference organized by Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies." p3.
- ⁴⁰ "Department of Statistics (Singapore)."
- ⁴¹ MINDEF. "History – 1965: Shouldering the Nation's Defence." Volume 6 Issue 8, August 7, 2002.
- ⁴² "Citizenship Controversies: Conscription and Conscience."
- ⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_Armed_Forces This figure was estimated as of 2005. It comprises 70,000 active personnel consisting of regulars and conscripts, and 350,000 reserves.

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- ⁴⁴ Ministry of Defence (Singapore). "Defending Singapore in the 21st Century."
- ⁴⁵ Malcolm H. Murfett. *Between Two Oceans. A Military History of Singapore From First Settlements to Final British Withdrawal*. p224-238.
- ⁴⁶ "National Security: Report of a conference organized by Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies."
- ⁴⁷ Anna Leander. p589
- ⁴⁸ Total Defence. "What is Total Defence." Total Defence consists of five core elements: Military Defense, Civil Defense, Economic Defense, Social Defense, and Psychological Defense.
- ⁴⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>. In the United States, of the 72 millions males available for military service, its combined armed forces (including Army, Marines, Navy, and Airforce) amounts to 1.5 million active and 1.5 million reserve personnel. This accounts for 4% of its eligible pool. For United Kingdom, the size of its armed forces comprises 194,000 active and 294,000 reserves personnel. This number is 3.4% of its eligible 14 millions males. In France with a tradition for conscription until 1997, it has 250,000 active and 419,000 reserve personnel. This accounts for 4.7% of its eligible 14 million males. For Singapore to establish a full-time professional corps of 420,000, it would be 32.5% of its eligible 1.29 million males.
- ⁵⁰ Ministry of Defence (Singapore). "Defending Singapore in the 21st Century."
- ⁵¹ Clay Harris.: p33.
- ⁵² Anna Leander.: p577.
- ⁵³ Cline, Austin. "War & Martial Values: Does War Produce Courage & Honor?"
- ⁵⁴ Anne Aldis.: p24-25.
- ⁵⁵ Tim Huxley. p10.
- ⁵⁶ Thomas R. Cagely. "Restoring the Draft, Reinvolving Society: Worth Consideration by Congress." *Army* 50, no. 4 (2000): 24.
- ⁵⁷ Henning Sorensen.: p331.
- ⁵⁸ MINDEF. "History – 1970: Medical Mission to East Pakistan". Volume 3 Issue 11, August 7, 2002.
- ⁵⁹ Anna Leander.: p590.
- ⁶⁰ Singaporeans include citizens and permanent residents in Singapore and abroad.
- ⁶¹ Clay Harris.: p31-32.
- ⁶² Clay Harris.: p31.
- ⁶³ National Security Coordination Centre. *The Fight Against Terror*. p12.

⁶⁴ MINDEF. "News – by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence to 24th Battalion Singapore Artillery and 128 Squadron." January 17, 2011. The Defence Minister of Singapore asserted the imperatives of Singapore being involved in overseas peace support missions by saying, "'We live in an interconnected world, where instability in another part of the world can affect peace and security of Singapore and our region....safeguarding our national security interests today includes participating in international peace and security missions to help bring stability to critical regions."

⁶⁵ Henning Sorensen. p331.

⁶⁶ Henning Sorensen. p330. The defense stance that Denmark has adopted illustrates that she can best defend herself by defending the peace abroad through the use of her conscripts.

⁶⁷ Ministry of Defence (Singapore). "Defending Singapore in the 21st Century."

⁶⁸ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1112360/1/.html> On 22 February 2011, a 6.3 magnitude earthquake hit Christchurch, New Zealand when the 116-men SAF contingent was conducting a bilateral training with its NZ counterparts. The Ministry of Defense of Singapore offered assistance to the NZ government for the SAF soldiers to help with rescue operations and provide humanitarian aid.

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